

Cognitive Dissonance

The Theory

Almost half a century ago social psychologist Leon Festinger developed **the cognitive dissonance theory** (Festinger, 1957). The theory has obviously stood the test of time in that it is mentioned in most general and social psychology textbooks today. The theory is somewhat counterintuitive and, in fact, fits into a category of counterintuitive social psychology theories sometimes referred to as **action-opinion theories**. The fundamental characteristic of action opinion theories is that they propose that actions can influence subsequent beliefs and attitudes. This is counterintuitive in that it would seem logical that our actions are the result of our beliefs/attitudes, not the cause of them. However, on further examination these types of theories have great intuitive appeal in that the theories, particularly cognitive dissonance, address the pervasive human tendency to rationalize.

Cognitive dissonance theory is based on three fundamental assumptions (see Figure 1).

1. *Humans are sensitive to inconsistencies between actions and beliefs.*

- According to the theory, we all recognize, at some level, when we are acting in a way that is inconsistent with our beliefs/attitudes/opinions. In effect, there is a built in alarm that goes off when we notice such an inconsistency, whether we like it or not. For example, if you have a belief that it is wrong to cheat, yet you find yourself cheating on a test, you will notice and be affected by this inconsistency.

2. *Recognition of this inconsistency will cause dissonance, and will motivate an individual to resolve the dissonance.*

- Once you recognize that you have violated one of your principles, according to this theory, you won't just say "oh well". You will feel some sort of mental anguish about this. The degree of dissonance, of course, will vary with the importance of your belief/attitude/principle and with the degree of inconsistency between your behavior and this belief. In any case, according to the theory, the greater the dissonance the more you will be motivated to resolve it.

3. *Dissonance will be resolved in one of three basic ways:*

a) *Change beliefs*

- Perhaps the simplest way to resolve dissonance between actions and beliefs is simply to change your beliefs. You could, of course, just decide that cheating is o.k. This would take care of any dissonance. However, if the belief is fundamental and important to you such a course of action is unlikely. Moreover, our basic beliefs and attitudes are pretty stable, and people don't just go around changing basic beliefs/attitudes/opinions all the time, since we



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rely a lot on our world view in predicting events and organizing our thoughts. Therefore, though this is the simplest option for resolving dissonance it's probably not the most common.

b) Change actions

- A second option would be to make sure that you never do this action again. Lord knows that guilt and anxiety can be motivators for changing behavior. So, you may say to yourself that you will never cheat on a test again, and this may aid in resolving the dissonance. However, aversive conditioning (i.e., guilt/anxiety) can often be a pretty poor way of learning, especially if you can train yourself not to feel these things. Plus, you may really benefit in some way from the action that's inconsistent with your beliefs. So, the trick would be to get rid of this feeling without changing your beliefs or your actions, and this leads us to the third, and probably most common, method of resolution.

c) Change perception of action

- A third and more complex method of resolution is to change the way you view/remember/perceive your action. In more colloquial terms, you would "rationalize" your actions. For example, you might decide that the test you cheated on was for a dumb class that you didn't need anyway. Or you may say to yourself that everyone cheats so why not you? In other words, you think about your action in a different manner or context so that it no longer appears to be inconsistent with your actions. If you reflect on this series of mental gymnastics for a moment you will probably recognize why cognitive dissonance has come to be so popular. If you're like me, you notice such post-hoc reconceptualizations (rationalizations) of behavior on the part of others all the time, though it's not so common to see it in one's self.

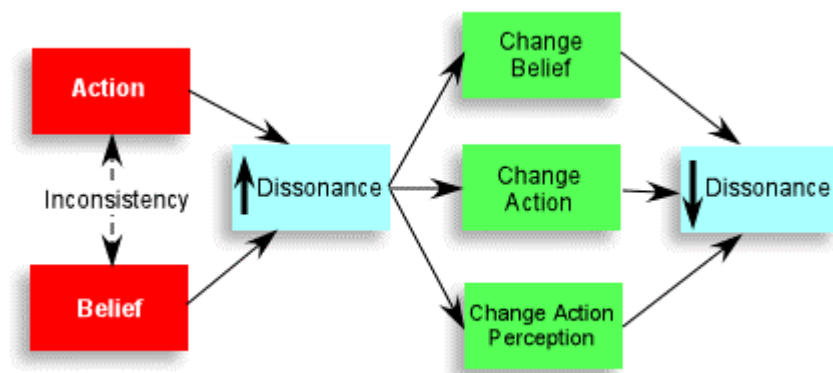


Figure 1. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The Experiment

There have been 100s, if not 1000s, of experiments that have examined cognitive dissonance theory since the theorist's inception, but the seminal experiment was published

in 1959 (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). This experiment is very interesting viewed within a psychological/historical context because it involved a direct test of a “mentalistic” theory versus a behaviorist theory. Cognitive dissonance theory was based on abstract/internal/mental concepts, which were, of course, anathema to the behaviorists. Festinger and Carlsmith set up an ingenious experiment which would allow for a direct test of cognitive dissonance theory versus a behavioral/reinforcement theory.

In this experiment all participants were required to do what all would agree was a boring task and then to tell another subject (who was actually a confederate of the experimenter) that the task was exciting. Half of the subjects were paid \$1 to do this and half were paid \$20 (quite a bit of money in the 1950s). Following this, all subjects were asked to rate how much they liked the boring task. This latter measure served as the experimental criterion/the dependent measure. According to behaviorist/reinforcement theory, those who were paid \$20 should like the task more because they would associate the payment with the task. Cognitive dissonance theory, on the other hand, would predict that those who were paid \$1 would feel the most dissonance since they had to carry out a boring task and lie to an experimenter, all for only 1\$. This would create dissonance between the belief that they were not stupid or evil, and the action which is that they carried out a boring task and lied for only a dollar (see Figure 2). Therefore, dissonance theory would predict that those in the \$1 group would be more motivated to resolve their dissonance by reconceptualizing/rationalizing their actions. They would form the belief that the boring task was, in fact, pretty fun. As you might suspect, Festinger’s prediction, that those in the \$1 would like the task more, proved to be correct.

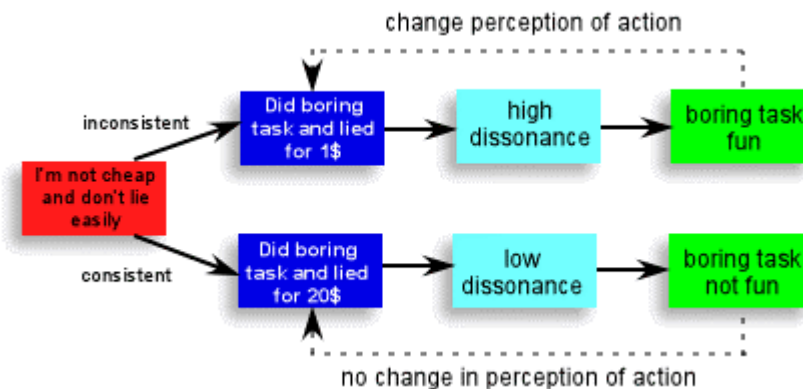


Figure 2. Cognitive Dissonance Theory and the Festinger & Carlsmith (1959) experiment

References

- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*, Evanston, IL: Row & Peterson.
- Festinger, L. & Carlsmith, J. M. (1959). Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 58, 203 – 210.